

Tara Eaton

Promise is an Ordinary Word  
*for Yilma Tafari*

The Return

I walk into our familiar suburban kitchen and drop my dusty purple backpack on the floor. Mom hugs me and says she is proud. My sandals, attached to the straps of my backpack, fall to the side and dry, red soil dirties the linoleum. It is dusk, mid-May, the end of the semester.

Mom asks me if I'm hungry and starts pulling vegetables, cheese, and leftover pasta out of the refrigerator before I can answer. After we eat, I carry my purple backpack upstairs and crumple on my bed beneath the weight of my abroad experience, trying to hold onto fleeting memories already starting to fade. The rolls of film, soapstone bowls, beaded bracelets, batik wall hangings, kangas, addresses with promises to write, and the notebooks full of Kiswahili – the things of my trip – are stowed in my pack. I will recover them later.

It has been eight years now and I still remember lying in my bed that night, unable to sleep or to be completely awake. For hours, I stared at the orange henna tattoos that stained my hands and feet. Like my memories, the tattoos were fading quickly. I drew the leaf-like, criss-cross patterns in the final pages of my journal but what I remember most was the loud silence of that night. It was oppressive, cavernous. I had grown used to community, to people always around talking, smiling, and laughing. I had never before felt so alone.

## Kakuma Refugee Camp

The last five weeks in Kenya, I had interned at Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya. Fascinated by the idea of displacement, I wanted to understand what it was like to be without a home. I knew that in Africa, refugee life was all too common. I wanted to know the human face of the situations I'd read about for my East African History, Women and Environment, and Media and Politics classes. I wanted to challenge my paradigm of living even further than it had been during the semester's first three months. I wanted a reason to object to my own way of life. And I wanted to see if I could help in some way.

Kakuma had been founded ten years before when thousands of young Sudanese boys fled from civil war. In seeking safety from their home, the boys escaped with the clothes on their backs to just inside Kenya's northern border. Today, these young men are known as the "lost boys" of Sudan and many have been resettled in the US and other countries. Since the founding of the camp, at any given time it has hosted up to 70,000 refugees from Somalia, Zaire, the Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, and Ethiopia.

## For Yilma Tafare

Here is picture I remember taking at Yilma's place. I set the camera on the table and used the timer. In the foreground, there is a blur of brown table. In the background, I am sitting between Yilma and some others. Yilma is wearing a fluorescent pink shirt and a wooden cross. He is smiling, I am smiling; I had just interviewed him about his life. On the wall behind us, pictures cut from western magazines are taped to the wall. In one a baby peers between two bars of a crib, smiling. Another depicts a woman in a red

bathing suit arching her back, posed on a beach. The backside of a woman wearing a long, flowing white gown is perched on a ledge in another. All of the pictures look like advertisements for perfume or Gucci, something you'd see on Fifth Avenue in New York City. Remembering the pictures, they surprise me; the seductive form of the female body surrounding us in his makeshift home. Perhaps, for Yilma, the magazine cut-outs helped him to maintain optimism, to compel hope. Perhaps things can yield a generative faith.

In my interview notes, Yilma said he only had one human right left: the right to fantasize. He dreamed about a better life. He felt neglected as a refugee; Kakuma was a prison for him. "I have no future here," he said. As a refugee, "You are dreaming only the past and living for today." He wanted to return to Ethiopia but thought it too dangerous and was satisfied to resettle. In the last week we were there, he left Kakuma for Nairobi.

In a farewell letter to Kakuma, Yilma wrote, "I know that I am missing Kakuma." For him, Kakuma had been his "university of life, where [he] learned and practiced many things." And today, as I try to recreate my experience in Kakuma, make sense of my time there, I know that I am missing it too: me too, Yilma, me too.